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INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING STUDENTS' POETRY  
COMPREHENSION AND INTERPRETATION IN ADVANCED PLACEMENT (AP)  
ENGLISH LITERATURE & COMPOSITION

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Education

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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“Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people.”

- Adrian Mitchell, British writer

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Chapter Overview

My capstone project focuses on identifying and explicating instructional techniques that improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature & Composition. Thus, my research question is: “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature & Composition?”

This chapter is organized into four main sections: 1) the motivation for my project, which describes the contextual factors for the problem I seek to solve; 2) the significance of my project, which delineates how this project will impact students, families, the school, and potentially other English teachers in the community; 3) a summary of this chapter; and 4) a preview of what is to come in subsequent chapters.

### Motivations

#### The Difficulty of Poetry

Poetry is the most condensed form of the human experience captured on a page (Johnson & Arp, 2015, p. 682), and one of humanity’s fundamental expressions of life. It precedes written language, having its roots in oral tradition (Johnson & Arp, 2015, p. 681), and -- not surprisingly -- has transformed in many ways over thousands of years: from Homer’s epic *Odyssey*, to Shakespeare’s famous “Sonnet XVIII,” to Gwendolyn Brooks’ swaggering “We Real Cool.” Despite differences in years, origin, gender, race, and more, one thing unites all poetry: the desire to convey an experience.

Poets differ from prose writers mainly because poets make use of multi-layered words, spacing, sound, and more. These authorial choices often mean that understanding poetry is no easy task for an untrained reader, and that it can be more difficult for teachers to train readers in this form. In fact, I have found that many English teachers -- including myself -- struggle with teaching poetry and, more often than not, the “study” of poetry ends up focusing almost exclusively on questions in the reader-response realm: “what did you think about the poem?” or “what did the poem remind you of?” or “how can you relate the poem to your life?” Though these questions certainly have a time and a place (e.g. engaging students through relatability), they are less likely to produce high-quality, analytical responses that are required in a college-level course.

The difficulty in teaching poetry is not unique to my experience and has been shown to discourage its teaching due to teachers’ lack of knowledge and confidence in doing so (Ray, 1999; Wade & Siddaway, 1990). Compounding the complexity of teaching this genre, educators already find their curriculums packed with short stories and novels, which are just as worthy of study. Some also believe that standardized testing has negatively impacted the time and space to teach poetry within curricula, as teachers are pressured to prepare their students for informational and other prose-based texts (Xerri, 2014).

### **Relation to My Context**

This general treatment of poetry as a secondary, tertiary, or even optional form of literature is no different at my school. Our curriculum emphasizes whole-novel study (versus, say, thematic units) and vocabulary, but has also become more writing-focused

within the past year. These curricular choices leave little room and space for deep study of poetry.

Minimal poetry instruction, for the majority of students, likely does not present any sort of troublesome deficiency in college and career readiness within English; however, it does present an issue for my senior AP English Literature & Composition students. Because this particular AP exam requires students to read, analyze, and write about poetry at the university level (as determined by The College Board), I have a responsibility to fill what I would consider to be a gaping fissure in their poetry education. In other words, I find that students who enter my senior AP English class are oftentimes ill-equipped to not only read poetry, but write about it or discuss it at the level I (or they) would hope. This observation is reflected in the AP exam scores from last year; students performed better on prose items -- multiple choice and essays -- than on poetry items. (These scores are discussed in more detail in a couple pages.)

Interestingly, I found myself in the exact same position as my students during my own 12th grade year of high school. Poetry was intimidating and I was not prepared to analyze it properly when I entered the course. As someone with a concrete, scientific mind, I remember reading the first few poems in English class about a decade ago and thinking, “Why don’t these poets just say what they think? Why do they have to make their message so complicated?” Thankfully, I had a phenomenal teacher -- one of my inspirations for becoming a language arts educator -- who helped me understand a genre I found incomprehensible, needlessly complex, and at times overwrought. Patience and practice paid off, and I aim to help students find the confidence and develop the skills that laid the foundation for my success in that course. In order to accomplish this goal, I

need to research and compile instructional techniques that will be both efficient and effective, especially considering my short time frame.

## **Significance**

### **Importance of Poetry**

First and foremost, poetry is an end in itself; it is worthy of deeper study simply by being a ubiquitous yet ever-changing mode of human expression, much like painting, music, or sculpture. However, we know that studying poetry in greater depth has more concrete, real-life consequences for students. Knowledge of poetry serves as cultural capital, or “cultural resources that can give students an advantage in the school setting” (Dumais, 2013, p. 168), that can be classified both as objectified -- “concrete cultural objects, such as a symphony or a work of art” -- and embodied -- “one's tastes, communication styles, and knowledge of the culture that is valued by society” (Dumais, 2013, p. 168). Thus, understanding the basics of poetry and familiarity within the poetic canon can be seen as a resource affecting social standing and mobility.

### **Impact on AP Scores**

From a more concrete perspective, greater knowledge of poetry can help students perform better on the AP English Literature & Composition exam held annually in May. Earning a qualifying score on the exam could mean procuring university credit, which saves students and families the time, stress, and money, associated with taking the equivalent of freshman-level English class. And, despite many skeptics arguing against the reductionistic nature of the AP English exams and standardized testing in general (Markham, 2001), it has also been shown that participating in “[AP] courses and high scores on the exams increase the likelihood of success in the equivalent courses in

college” (Scott, Tolson, & Yi-Hsuan, 2010, p. 30). Thus, their success in my AP English class is not just about scoring well on the exam, but also about developing skills and knowledge that they will take to their university classes.

Besides impacting students and their families, qualifying scores also have the potential to reflect well on the instructor, curriculum, and the institution at large. At a time in which schools -- especially private schools like mine -- are jockeying for enrollment, test scores are an important selling point as families consider where to send their children. Furthermore, one of our school goals in the 2020 strategic plan is to have “at least 60% of our graduating students earning 12 or more college credits up from 38% in 2016 and 100% of our students earning at least 6 college credits” (“2020-2021 Strategic Plan,” 2016); part of my role as an AP instructor is to help the school achieve this goal, which ultimately helps maintain our accreditation through AdvancEd.

Generally, I was pleased with last year’s test results: 92% of my students passed (i.e. scored a composite of a 3 or higher) compared to the national average of 52.80% (College Board, 2017). I also liked seeing that 29% of my students earned a 5 (compared to the national 6.8%) and 21% earned a 4 (compared to the national 16.1%). However, as I dug further into my results, I noticed that my students scored slightly lower on the poetry multiple choice than the prose multiple choice, and the poetry essay had a lower average score than either the prose or open-ended essays. Though these results represent one year of data, it seems clear that poetry is an area of weakness.

### **Impact on Curriculum**

This project also has the potential to impact the current curriculum at my school. Completing my capstone will allow me to transform my own curriculum (as the singleton

AP English Literature & Composition teacher) into one based on the most effective strategies, which will create a large impact as I spend about 40% of class time on poetry. It is also possible that my findings shift the wider English curriculum. There is a culture of sharing among several English teachers at my school, and we enjoy sharing strategies that work for our population; thus it is possible that the department could choose to be more inclusive of forms beyond whole novels and short stories, while also embracing concrete tools to teach poetry. (Conceivably, other content areas could integrate poetry here and there as well.) Finally, my capstone project will help document institutional knowledge; should I ever leave my position, I can contribute to the continuity of the program and provide useful tips for the incoming instructor.

### **Impact Outside My Context**

Beyond the walls of my current workplace, my project has the opportunity to contribute to the larger (local, state, national) discussions surrounding both poetry instruction and teaching AP English Literature & Composition. I know a few fellow instructors personally, and my findings could possibly impact their methods or simply provide inspiration. Zooming out a bit more, my project is something that I could offer up as a resource to other AP English Literature & Composition teachers, especially newer ones who might be more uncertain about what content and skills to teach and how to develop them.

### **Chapter Summary**

I started chapter one by identifying my research question: “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in AP English Literature & Composition?” My motivations for investigating this question

include validating poetry as an art form and attempting to solve a real instructional situation I find myself in every year. This project could lend students cultural capital; impact students' time, stress, financial obligations, and academic success at college; influence the curriculum and enrollment at my school; and contribute to larger discussions about teaching poetry and teaching AP English Literature & Composition.

### **Preview of Subsequent Chapters**

In chapter two, I will review literature on general literacy and poetry-specific techniques related to comprehension and interpretation. In chapter three, I will describe the details of my project, including context, guiding frameworks and theories, and justification of its format. Finally, in chapter four I will reflect on conclusions I have drawn from completing my capstone and project.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Overview

This chapter synthesizes existing literature related to the question: “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in AP English Literature & Composition?” The chapter is divided into nine sections: 1) defining poetry and describing its origins, 2) explaining poetry’s current role in the curriculum, 3) clarifying the benefits of teaching it, 4) describing the College Board’s guidelines regarding poetry in AP English Literature & Composition, 5) defining reading comprehension, as well as describing several major approaches and instructional techniques, 6) defining fiction interpretation, as well as describing two major approaches and instructional techniques, 7) identifying and describing poetry-specific instructional techniques, 8) summarizing the chapter, and 9) providing a preview of subsequent chapters.

#### Poetry

##### What is poetry?

Because my project rests on a single genre, poetry, it is important to understand exactly what that form is. Admittedly, poetry is an elusive term. Most people can recognize a poem if they see or hear one, but far fewer can provide an adequate definition of this ethereal art form. Even poets themselves have struggled with its definition, an idea most famously captured in British poet A.E. Housman’s 1928 letter to a prominent book collector: “I can no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat; but he knows a rat when he comes across one, and I recognise poetry by definite physical sensations, either



down the spine, or at the back of the throat, or in the pit of the stomach” (Burnett, 2007, p. 68).

Two-time Poet Laureate Howard Nemerov defines poetry as “literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm” (2017). This definition contains the two main characteristics of poetry; first, that it relays and creates an experience, and second, that it uses language and form in more specific, purposeful ways than prose typically does. Some, however, would disagree with the latter piece, arguing that markers such as arrangement of lines on a page or rhythm are too superficial; these literary minds tend to replace the idea of form with the idea of concentration, i.e. that poetry “is the most condensed... form of literature” (Johnson & Arp, 2015, p. 9).

### **Poetry’s Origins**

Regardless of its exact definition, scholars agree that poetry is one of the oldest forms of literature. The genre has its roots in oral tradition (which is literally prehistoric), and once writing systems developed, most “early works [of literature] were written in poetical metre which the writer had heard repeated over time” (Mark, 2009). Needless to say, poetry has been a fundamental form of expression; though it has evolved over thousands of years and in innumerable ways, the form remains an integral part of capturing the human experience to this day.

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

Poetry is a complex term that has multiple meanings that have morphed over time; however, most agree that it relays an experience through a purposeful form and is

condensed. It is also one of the oldest forms of literature known and has been used to capture life experiences for thousands of years.

The next section will describe poetry's traditional role within the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum in the United States. This general, national role of poetry manifested in my current teaching context, which created instructional problems that have motivated my capstone project.

### **Poetry in the Curriculum**

#### **Impact of the Common Core State Standards**

Despite its inherent importance to histories and cultures across the globe, poetry is deemphasized in the United States curriculum for a number of reasons. From a national perspective, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were introduced in 2009 and have been fully adopted by forty-two states, advocate for spending less time on literary texts and more on informational texts. This recommendation was neither new nor groundbreaking, in the sense that there had already been solid research supporting a greater emphasis on expository texts, especially in relation to producing greater levels of college and career readiness. Most notably, this recommendation can be seen in the "Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress." This document, published by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), an organization that oversees and sets policies for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), proposed that, in fourth grade, students should spend equal time on literary and informational texts; by eighth grade, literary texts are relegated to 45%; and by senior year, literary texts should only represent 30% of course readings (2008).

### **Impact of Standardized Testing**

Some also argue that standardized testing has constricted teachers' freedom to explore content and skills less related to those being assessed on statewide exams (Kohn, 2000; Xerri, 2014). Put simply, because standardized exams can be used to evaluate and affect the funding of schools, they encourage teachers to focus on developing skills that are most closely related to those on the exams. Though these skills are valuable and worth developing and many would argue that measuring student achievement is both necessary and healthy, the pressure placed on teachers also goads them towards providing test preparation versus a rich and varied education. Unfortunately, this "controlling, 'topdown' push... may actually produce a lower quality of education, precisely because its tactics constrict the means by which teachers most successfully inspire students' engagement in learning, and commitment to achieve" (Kohn, 2000, p. 29). Specifically in English courses, both Xerri (2014) and Kohn (2000) note that, because of standardized testing, it is often poetry and drama that are the first genres thrown out, as they are least represented on most exams. However, even if the exams do incorporate poetry, educators are more likely to teach the genre, but in a mechanical, superficial way (Benton, 2000; Xerri, 2013).

### **Impact of Teacher Uncertainty**

Beyond standards and testing that have encouraged shifts in curriculum, another reason poetry is often neglected is lack of teacher training and confidence (Benton, 1999; Ray, 1999; Wade & Siddaway, 1990). In one survey, pre-service teachers noted that they enjoyed poetry during their own elementary years, but either struggled to understand or simply did not enjoy poetry at the high school level; this ultimately led most of those

surveyed to avoid teaching poetry within their own classrooms (Ray, 1999, p. 404).

Others are unsure of how to explain the importance of teaching poetry, especially when most curriculums are already strained by numerous other obligations. Ultimately, these uncertainties compound and result in poetry avoidance within the classroom.

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

Zooming out, it is clear that multiple forces have contributed to poetry's substandard status in the language arts curricula, including the CCSS, standardized testing, and teacher uncertainty. However, there are many reasons that English teachers, curriculum writers, and policymakers should reconsider poetry's role, which are described in the next section.

### **Benefits of Teaching Poetry**

#### **Fulfills the Common Core State Standards**

First, despite the recent emphasis on teaching informational texts, the CCSS for ELA explicitly mention poetry almost fifty times, and at least once at every grade level including kindergarten (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). It is also noteworthy that poetry is referenced in every single strand of the CCSS -- Reading: literature, Reading: foundational skills, Speaking and Listening, Language, and Writing -- except, naturally, Reading: informational text. In other words, though on the surface poetry may seem like an unnecessary supplement, the CCSS suggest that English teachers should be deliberately integrating poetry into the classroom

Poetry advocates also take care to note that there are ways to teach the genre that are both standards-based and rigorous (which will be detailed later in this chapter). Far

too often, poetry is taught through the reader-response lens and in a way that gleans over untapped potential within the poem to develop content knowledge and skills. Teachers might read a poem aloud in class and ask students if they liked the poem or what it made them think about. This, of course, can be a great starting point, but the lesson frequently ends right at its beginning. Instead, we can look to the standards for help in providing higher-order thinking, such as the example given in this sixth grade reading strand: “CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9: Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 37). Achieving this standard might involve, for example, comparing how the mythological sirens are represented in Homer’s *Odyssey* versus in Margaret Atwood’s poem “Siren Song.” In short, poetry is not only explicitly included in the standards, but can also be a great vehicle for developing the knowledge and skills within them.

### **Develops Literacy and Thinking Skills**

The most obvious area of potential is using poetry to increase literacy. Poetry has been shown to build fluency and increase word recognition, along with a host of other related reading skills (Wilfong, 2008). What is perhaps more interesting and less obvious is that the thinking skills associated with poetry can also be transferred across the curriculum. For example, in Bailey’s 1989 article “The Importance of Teaching Poetry,” she posits that poetry’s abstract nature lends itself to creating and testing hypotheses, a cognitive skill most often seen integrated into science courses. Students are called upon to use a wide variety of thinking skills and problem-solving skills to unpack the meaning

of poems, such as understanding denotations and connotations of new vocabulary, track logic within complex grammatical patterns, and more. Ultimately, Bailey argues, students synthesize information from various parts of a poem and create “hypotheses” to test their interpretations against other students’; a practice that is natural in the sciences is easily reframed to work with literature.

### **Provides Positive “Whole Person” Outcomes**

Beyond concrete academic skills, poetry has been shown to provide value for people in other ways. Poetry is associated with promoting democratic ideals, including developing a sense of social justice in young people (Ciardiello, 2010; Kinloch, 2005). Additionally, poetry has been used to instill empathy within the classroom community itself and for people outside the school walls, in both educational and clinical settings (Gorrell, 2000; Ingram, 2003; Muszkat, Yehuda, Moses, & Naparstek, 2010). The genre has also been used with significant success in therapy programs, as poetry has been shown to help people understand and express their own thoughts, as well as find healing through listening to others’ (Levine & Levine, 2011; Wilkinson, 2009).

Based on a plethora of research, it is clear that poetry is uniquely positioned to help our students grow both as students and people. Its unique use of language and form provides a “fresh look” at the world, and offers a place to combine the brain and the heart (Benton, 1990). And despite the forces that aim to constrict it and arguments about its seeming impracticality or irrelevance, “some nod must be given to a larger idea: that we live through our consciousness, that thought is composed of words, that as English teachers we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to put words into our students’

heads-crisp, delicious words, ‘words opalescent, cool, and pearly,’ words to entertain and sustain them. Words they may never forget” (Waddell, 2011, p. 33).

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

This section established that poetry is a worthwhile subject to study in schools. Not only does it fulfill the CCSS and have positive academic outcomes, but it is also associated with positive personal and emotional outcomes. Now the focus will narrow in on what specific guidelines are provided from The College Board in relation to teaching poetry in AP English Literature & Composition. These guidelines are important to note, as they will help determine the scope of my capstone project.

### **The College Board & AP English Literature & Composition**

#### **Course Overview**

The College Board is a not-for-profit educational organization that seeks to provide opportunities for students to grow in and show their academic success. The organization is best known for producing the SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) exams, the latter of which will be the focus of this section.

According to the course description provided by The College Board, AP English Literature & Composition “engages students in the careful reading and critical analysis of imaginative literature” (2014, p. 7). Just within this introductory sentence, the emphasis on close reading and deep understanding of literary concepts and language is apparent. There is no required reading list. However, in order to provide a rich and varied reading diet, the course should provide students with texts that span the 16th to 21st century, and cover a variety of styles, topics, and genres. One of these genres, of course, is poetry.

### **Guidelines on Poetry**

Within the course description, The College Board provides a list of representative poets -- e.g. Eliot, Frost, Hughes -- that illustrates the quality and range of reading that is required. Also provided is a practice exam that shows both multiple choices questions and essay prompts on poems. Beyond these two items in the course description, The College Board also supplies on its website sample syllabi, old exams, as well as student essay samples with scores and grading commentary, so that teachers can glean implicit expectations. Advice on poetic terminology and teaching strategies are certainly present within The College Board's "Teacher Guide," but the guide admits that there is no explicit list of terms students must know, and the strategies suggested are few and seemingly obvious, e.g. reading aloud (Greenblatt, 2014).

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

In short, new teachers in AP English Literature & Composition are provided with a list of representative authors, examples of poems used in multiple choice questions and essay prompts, and a few guidelines on strategy. This amount of information given is likely in the name of being descriptive versus prescriptive, but also leaves teachers who are new to AP English Literature & Composition with a potentially overwhelming amount of freedom, hence the utility of my project, which will be described further in the next chapter. To establish a foundation of research for my project, in the next three sections of the literature review, I will describe instructional techniques for reading comprehension and fiction interpretation, and then show how those relate to poetry.



## Reading Comprehension: Instructional Techniques

### Definition

Reading comprehension can be defined as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Snow, 2002). Comprehension is a reciprocal process: to be able to comprehend a text, students need certain cognitive and linguistic skills ready to use -- e.g. understanding common syntactical structures -- and practicing reading will allow students to build on these skills and ultimately increase their comprehension. Numerous factors affect reading comprehension, including everything from background knowledge on the text’s topic to the reader’s motivation to the way a teacher implements a comprehension strategy.

### Major Approaches to Instruction

Approaches to literacy have developed over many decades and have influenced the way we look at comprehension instruction today. Instead of providing a historical overview of literacy theories, this section will discuss the spectrum between the skills-emphasis approach and the meaning-emphasis approach, with balanced literacy in-between. Comprehensive literacy instruction, which is based on the balanced literacy approach and which many literacy experts agree is our current gold standard, will also be described.

**Skills-emphasis approach.** The skills-emphasis approach, also known as the bottom-up approach or sometimes as code emphasis, stresses that “perceptual and phonemic skills influence higher cognitive functioning (such as reading)” (Wang, 2014, p. 429). In other words, students rely on their knowledge of parts -- letters, phonological

qualities of letter patterns, individual words -- to understand the whole -- sentences, paragraphs, etc. Within this approach, teachers rely on explicit instruction of both content and skills, and students are encouraged to practice skills frequently, even in isolation. Oftentimes, this approach is criticized for lacking meaningful context as it can be implemented as a sort of “skill and drill” technique.

**Meaning-emphasis approach.** In contrast, the meaning-emphasis approach, also known as the top-down approach or whole language approach, “underscores the fact that higher-level cognitive functions such as concepts and inferences influence lower-level processes” (Wang, 2014, p. 429). With this approach, the whole (usually a text) is used to understand the individual parts, i.e. skills. For example, a lesson that uses the meaning-emphasis approach might involve reading aloud a text in class (presenting the whole) and then, once the main ideas are understood, delving into specifics, e.g. decoding vocabulary based on context or analyzing how an author creates tone through diction.

**Balanced, comprehensive approach.** Interestingly, both approaches have research that supports their respective effectiveness and yet those who have studied the two approaches agree that blending both together can be more effective than relying exclusively on either, i.e. using balanced literacy instruction (Pressley & Allington, 2014; Rasinski & Blachowicz, 2012; Wang, 2014). One common way to frame balanced literacy is that the emphasis on skills and meaning are, quite literally, balanced, in that somewhat equal attention is paid to both in the classroom. However, others believe that this metaphor is misleading and that it should be replaced with something that better represents the multidimensional nature of choosing aspects from each approach (Asselin, 1999); the main reframing of balanced literacy to better account for its complexity is

often called comprehensive literacy instruction, which is the term that will be used moving forward in this capstone (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Regardless of how comprehensive or balanced literacy is viewed, two things are clear. First, there is no single, definitive method to integrate this type of literacy instruction into classrooms (Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005; Wharton-MacDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). Second, this type of literacy instruction is associated with making students stronger readers (Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins, & Socias, 2009; Pearson, 2004; Pressley & Allington, 2014; Wharton-MacDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

### **Instructional Techniques**

This section will provide an overview of four research-based instructional techniques related to reading comprehension in the high school setting; keeping in mind the recent call for comprehensive literacy, some techniques will be emphasize meaning (“top down”) while others will emphasize skill (“bottom up”). It is also important to note that the best comprehensive literacy instruction depends on teachers using their professional knowledge and skills to understand what is best for their specific contexts (Griffo, Madda, Pearson, & Raphael, 2015). Furthermore, instead of collecting and attempting to use dozens of techniques, it is considered better practice for teachers to select a few carefully and integrate them consistently (Fisher & Frey, 2015).

**Reciprocal teaching.** One common comprehension strategy implemented into comprehensive literacy programs is reciprocal teaching (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Fisher & Frey, 2015). Reciprocal teaching typically happens in small groups, though it has been used in one-on-one and whole-group settings (Duke & Pearson, 2008). In reciprocal teaching, students read a text and have a structured

conversation that involves four main thinking skills: summarizing, clarifying, predicting, and questioning, all of which the teacher would likely model in advance (depending on the grade level and other contextual factors). During this collaborative discussion, students either take turns (e.g. one person is the predictor) or lead using one or all of the four thinking skills. By going through this process, students learn how to become better independent readers and engage in contribute meaningfully to discussion. There is significant research backing reciprocal teaching; most notably, Rosenshine and Meister's 1994 work -- as cited in Duke & Pearson (2008) -- synthesized sixteen studies about reciprocal teaching and deduced that it is, indeed, effective at increasing reading comprehension.

**Text structures.** Another common best practice within comprehension is to provide instruction on text structures (Alvermann, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Ohlson, Monroe-Ossi, & Parris, 2015). Teaching text structures makes students more aware of the organization of information within a text and how pieces relate to each other. Countless studies have proven that knowledge of text structures has a positive effect on comprehension; in fact, one synthesis of several studies found that “almost any approach to teaching the structure of informational text improves both comprehension and recall of key text information” (Duke & Pearson, 2008, p. 111). This strategy also works with narrative texts. Typically in elementary school, students learn about and identify elements of a story's structure (also known as Freytag's Pyramid); later on, sophisticated readers can readily identify elements, but then also analyze how authors comply with or deviate from traditional “story grammar” and what that might mean (Ohlson, Monroe-Ossi, & Parris, 2015, p. 271).

**Graphic organizers.** A third technique involves modeling and using graphic organizers. Graphic organizers have positive impacts on comprehension with students of all different abilities, including English Learners (ELs) (Pang, 2013) and those with learning disabilities (LDs) (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004). One of the main benefits of graphic organizers is that they help students understand the purpose for reading so that they are more focused. Another benefit is that they help students sort information into understandable categories or smaller parts; instead of looking at a mass of text, they have a visual that illustrates how information relates to each other, e.g. cause and effect, hierarchy, sequence, scale/spectrum, and more. Graphic organizers are certainly not limited to the English classroom, and have been used with great success in various content areas (Alvermann, 2002; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2015).

**Close reading.** Finally, practicing close reading improves reading comprehension (Fisher & Frey, 2015; Gambrell, Malloy, Marinak, Mazzoni, 2015). As the CCSS pushes teachers to use increasingly complex texts with higher lexiles, strategies historically reserved for college-level students or those in advanced programs have trickled down to high schools, including close reading (Boyles, 2013; Fisher & Frey, 2015). On a literal level, close reading is reading closely -- examining the text inside and out. Ultimately, the goal is for students to engage with the text repeatedly and discover new aspects of the text and/or uncover new meanings. Fisher & Fry (2015) maintain that there are three keys to close reading: 1) posing deep text-dependent questions that revolve around what the text says, how it works, and what it means; 2) holding collaborative conversations that encourage students to challenge each other; and 3) engaging in post-reading tasks that

require synthesizing information from the text and various learning activities (p. 260-262). Others would agree, while also recommending that teachers implement a close-reading routine (Boyles, 2013; Lehman & Roberts, 2013).

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

The instructional techniques above are important, evidence-based tools that help students read more accurately; accurate reading relates to one part of my research topic: increasing comprehension. In the next section, I will explore another piece of my research topic: interpretation. I will define interpretation as it relates to fiction, and -- in a similar way to reading comprehension -- highlight a couple approaches and several research-based instructional techniques. Combining my knowledge of comprehension and interpretation will influence poetry instruction, the major focus of my capstone project.

### **Fiction Interpretation: Instructional Techniques**

#### **Definition**

The College Board defines interpretation as “analysis of literary works through close reading to arrive at an understanding of their multiple meanings” (*AP English Literature and Composition Course Description*, 2014, p. 7). In a broader sense, interpreting fiction can also be called literary analysis, which encourages students to make interpretive claims based on text evidence and their knowledge of literary techniques (Sosa, Hall, Goldman, & Lee, 2016). Literary analysis and other higher-order interpretations of fiction depend on basic, literal comprehension (Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984), so it is important that accurate comprehension is established before attempting serious analysis.

However, comprehension is just one component of developing strong fiction readers. One factor that affects fiction interpretation is students' background experiences and beliefs, which create a lens through which they read texts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Langer, 1990; Sosa, Hall, Goldman, & Lee, 2016; Troise, 2007). Students are more likely to be engaged if they can personally connect to texts and, with teacher guidance, these connections can help students create stronger interpretations (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2002). Another factor affecting interpretation skills is the unique set of past experiences with literature, whether these were academic or personal in nature. For example, students who have been taught to read strictly for literary analysis, which is much of English instruction, tend to make interpretive claims in terms of the formal aspects of literature, e.g. "The theme of the story is..." and can struggle to move beyond these formalist views (Troise, 2007).

### **Major Approaches**

There are many approaches to teaching literature, and based on both my experience and research, it seems the two most common in high school classrooms are reader response and formalism. The reader response approach, based on Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading, focuses on providing students opportunities to relate to ideas and characters within the text. This approach has the ability to engage and motivate students as they see how the text relates to their lives. However, a common criticism of reader response instruction is that it can treat literature as a purely subjective experience, which can then problematize assessment and potentially rigor. Some also might argue that relying too heavily on providing feelings-based reactions will not build deep reading skills that students need to be college and career ready (Knapp, 2002).

On the other end of the spectrum, formalist instruction places the text, not the reader, in the center. This approach teaches students to see texts as a deliberately-constructed piece of art that can be isolated from any external factors (e.g. the author's life, history, etc.) and analyzed. Within this type of instruction, educators focus on developing students' repertoire of literary terminology and interpretation skills, such as analyzing how diction and detail develop complex characters or how point of view influences the meanings within the story.

Much like the previous discussion on the skills-emphasis versus meaning-emphasis debate ultimately resulted in establishing the middle ground as most beneficial, there is research that shows that blending the reader response and formalist approaches can be a powerful combination for student learning (*Effective Literature Instruction*, 2001; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2002; Levine & Horton, 2015). It is especially important for high school teachers to provide balance, as engagement with and motivation to read wanes later in students' educational careers (Agee, 2000). Naturally, however, the best mode of instruction rests in the hands of the professional, and educators should ultimately determine what is best for their students and context.

### **Instructional Techniques**

What follows is a description of three instructional techniques that have been shown to improve interpretation skills of high school students.

**Think aloud.** The first is the think aloud, which can either be led by teachers or produced by students. Think alouds delivered by the teacher are generally used to model a thought process so that students can eventually, with guided practice, complete that thought process or academic activity independently. For example, if students need help



understanding how to annotate poetry, the teacher might project a short poem and annotate it while verbalizing his or her internal thoughts, which then appear on the poem itself in the form of annotations.

Student think alouds are not only helpful because they allow students to process their thoughts out loud, but also because they enable teachers to hear the inner workings of the students' minds and understand their reading strategies (Langer, 1990). Teachers can then guide students either by refocusing the way they process, or by challenging them to process further or in a different way. Think alouds also have the potential to demonstrate "flexibility" in literary thinking, which is associated with expert readers who express more openness to multiple interpretations (Janssen, Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, & Van den Bergh, 2005). Regardless of whether they are generated by teachers or students, think alouds are associated with both stronger comprehension and interpretation skills (Duke & Pearson, 2008; Langer, 1991)

**Whole-group discussion.** Whole-group discussion is another technique that has been shown to increase high school students' fiction interpretation abilities (Agee, 2000; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Gritter, 2011; Ohlson, Monroe-Ossi, & Parris, 2015). One analysis found that discussion-based approaches "were significantly related to... [English] performance, with controls for initial literacy levels, gender, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity" (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). That being said, multiple sources recommend that the teacher rethinks the traditional whole-group discussion format, in which the teacher poses a question, one student answers, and then the teacher moves on to another question. Instead, teachers should aim to be facilitators and guides, and -- if the classroom environment allows --

have students simply talk to each other instead of every comment being filtered through the teacher, or use another format like Socratic Seminar (Gritter, 2011; Langer, 2000; Zyngier & Fialho, 2010). Multiple sources also recommend establishing clear expectations for discussion, as well as reflecting on discussion sessions (Gritter, 2011; Nystrad & Gamoran, 1991; Zwiers, 2014).

**Critical lenses.** Finally, applying critical lenses to literature -- whether it is through discussion or writing -- is associated with producing deeper interpretations of texts (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014; Carroll, 2006; Troise, 2007; Wilson, 2014). Critical lenses are typically associated with college-level literature, but the increase in complexity required by the CCSS and, for some, the rigor required by AP courses make critical lenses an excellent method for moving toward deeper textual interpretation. Also, according to Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone (2014), critical lens instruction can fill in a much-needed gap in English classrooms, as formalism and reader response approaches “typically leave... dominant ideologies unexamined and unquestioned, thereby potentially perpetuating ideologies that privilege some and marginalize others” (p. 123).

Teaching critical lenses is not necessarily a quick strategy that produces immediate results, and there are a number of different ways to go about using this technique to deepen students’ interpretation of fiction. One way would be to scaffold from the ground up: students would first read about common lenses (e.g. Marxist, feminist, historical) to establish a basic understanding of each. From there, teachers might model the application of a lens to a piece of literature that students know quite well, with guided practice and then independent practice to follow. Another way might flip the order

of the first two steps, and yet another would be to introduce a piece of literary criticism as a model. There is no “best practice” method of teaching critical lenses, but it is clear from the research cited that it pays dividends in growing students’ interpretive abilities when reading literature.

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

Fiction interpretation is a significant part of high school English teachers’ curricula. Though there are various approaches, blending skills with meaning through a variety of techniques described above will yield positive results. The next section of this literature review is arguable the most important as it is the ultimate focus of my project: instructional techniques related to poetry.

### **Poetry: Instructional Techniques**

#### **Major Approaches**

The reader response versus formalism debate is no less fiery in poetry than it is in prose. Many studies and poets themselves tend toward the reader response approach, in which people are allowed to construct their own meanings and work towards deeper interpretation; this affective-based approach has been shown to increase engagement and appreciation of poetry (Eva-Wood, 2004; Eva-Wood, 2008; Lockward, 2008; Porcaro, 2003). However, some qualify or disagree with this approach. Both Knapp (2002) and Peskin (2009) write that solely focusing on the reader-response approach will not necessarily provide students with the terminology and skills they need to become “expert” versus novice poetry readers; instead, they both cite Fish’s 1980 work that established the idea of “interpretive communities.” These interpretive communities allow “for both personal response and stability of interpretation, in that different readers

with a background of common assumptions will see the text through the same filter” (Peskin, 2009, p. 236). Within interpretive communities, readers acknowledge that their responses are both individual and a reflection of their sociocultural context or larger community, so meanings can be neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective (Knapp, 2002).

### **Instructional Techniques**

**Start with engagement.** When first introducing poetry analysis, educators’ experiences and research suggest that English teachers should avoid starting with technical information, like poetry terminology (Eva-Wood, 2004; Haaland, 2017; Jago, 2002; Lockward, 1994; Steineke, 2002). Because high school students are typically disengaged with poetry, it is important to build engagement and interest before delving into specialized vocabulary (Abrahamson, 2002; Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Eva-Wood 2004). Two impactful techniques to engage high school students with poetry are helping students discover relevancy and personal connections to poems.

Encouraging students to develop relevant, personal connections to poems can be a difficult task; after all, what does a Generation Z student have in common with a Metaphysical poet from the 17th century? Bowmer and Curwood (2016), Haugh et al. (2002), and Porcaro (2003) suggest creating relevance through pop culture. In Bowmer and Curwood’s “From Keats to Kanye: Romantic Poetry and Popular Culture in the Secondary English Classroom” (2016), students created a remix of a Romantic poem with a contemporary song, e.g. “Holy Thursday” by William Blake and “Same Love” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis. Though creating consistent, high-quality poetry across ability levels was admittedly questionable, students reported significantly higher levels of

engagement because they saw how the ideas and words within the poem connected to their current contexts. Both Haugh et al. (2002) and Porcaro (2003) found similar success using song lyrics at the beginning of units to engage students, creating both relevance and engagement.

There are other methods of developing personal connections that do not rely on pop culture and music. Eva-Wood (2004) used “think-and-feel alouds” -- based on the think aloud process described in the comprehension section of this capstone -- which ultimately created higher levels of engagement but also deeper, more elaborate interpretations of the poems themselves. Another approach is to create a reader-response journal (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Haugh et al., 2002) that “collects” students’ personal associations with poems. Yet another is to simply ask questions that focus on personal responses, in the style of Rosenblatt’s reader response (Lockward, 1994; Steineke, 2002), e.g. “What did you think about while listening to this poem?”

**Allow student choice.** Allowing students to choose poetry can also be effective at increasing interpretation skills, as this technique rests on increasing student engagement (Abrahamson, 2002; Jago, 2002; Lockward, 1994; Steineke, 2002). As with most techniques, there are a variety of factors that teachers should consider when determining the level of student choice: age-appropriateness, maturity, reading level, prior instruction, and more. For students who are younger or less certain in their poetry skills, teachers can start the process of choice by providing a slim anthology of poems (e.g. ten to twenty in total), and allowing students to choose from the anthology which poems they would like to react to and study (Abrahamson, 2002; Lockward, 1994; Steineke, 2002).

Carol Jago's article "From the Secondary Section: When Students Choose the Poems" (2002) provides an excellent, descriptive approach for allowing student choice in poetry study. First, she gave students an open-ended task: find a poem in a library book that you want to share with the class. Organically, questions were generated about criteria, so the class collaborated on the parameters that the poems should fit within. Jago found that, overwhelmingly, her students were drawn to Alice Walker; Jago took this cue and made Walker's poetry the center of their poetry unit, much to the enjoyment of her students.

Of course there are potential pitfalls to allowing student choice, and teachers need to be prepared to guide students towards poetry that is worthy of analysis and ability-appropriate. However, both styles of allowing student choice provide young people with the opportunity to evaluate poems and justify their choices with both their teacher and their peers, which encourages deeper interpretations of their chosen poems.

**Encourage sensitivity to sensory imagery.** Because poetry aims to convey an experience, much of it relies on stimulating the senses; thus, encouraging sensitivity to sensory imagery is naturally connected to producing deeper analyses of poetry (Abrahamson, 2002; Eva-Wood, 2008; Haugh et al., 2002; Jones, 2004; Knapp, 2002; Lockward, 1994). At the cognitive level, understanding and responding to imagery allows readers to undergo a more "visceral experience" with poetry; this experience activates more neural pathways within the brain, which -- according to Holbrook (2005) as cited in Eva-Wood (2008) -- "heighten[s] readers' observation skills" (p. 573). Both Haugh et al. (2002) and Jones (2004) used image-based poetry to elicit stronger interpretations from their students. Haugh et al. (2002) found success with an annotation method that involved

bracketing off images and analyzing patterns among them, while Jones (2004) asked his students to “read like a tourist.” Positioning themselves as tourists within descriptive poems, students became more attentive to all types of image -- not just visual -- which ultimately created a more robust poetic experience and stronger interpretations. Sensory imagery is also tied to engagement; one study found that high school seniors enjoyed poetry more when it contained a healthy amount of imagery and metaphorical language” (Abrahamson, 2002).

**Practice writing poetry.** Perhaps the most ubiquitous technique mentioned within the literature was that having students write poetry themselves is associated with stronger analysis when reading (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Gorlewski & Fogle, 2012; Haugh et al., 2002; Jones, 2004; Lardner, 1990; Linabarger, 2005; Steineke, 2002). Much like the approaches to teaching poetry, there seem to be two extremes when guiding students to write poetry. The first involves a sort of “Mad Lib” approach in which teachers delete a few words out of a mostly-completed structure, and students insert their own words; the second is an open-ended “write about anything approach.” Neither of these extremes were found to be the best choices based on research and teachers’ individual classrooms. Instead, educators and researchers noted that providing guidelines while being flexible in either content or form was appropriate. Some provided the comforts of structure by having students create parodies or imitations of poems, with one challenging his students to write a better Imagist poem than Ezra Pound (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Gorlewski & Fogle, 2012; Haugh et al., 2002; Jones, 2004). By writing poetry themselves, students will organically discover the tools that poets use --

connotation, imagery, symbol, meter, and more -- which can lead to deeper appreciation, understanding, and interpretation of the elusive form.

### **Section Summary and Looking Forward**

This section acknowledged two major approaches to teaching poetry and advocated for a research-based middle ground. Afterwards, several instructional techniques that were found to be effective in high school English classrooms were identified and explained. The next section of this capstone will provide an overall summary of chapter two and a preview of chapters three and four.

### **Chapter Summary**

This literature review identified and discussed a variety of topics related to my research question: “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in AP English Literature & Composition?” The chapter began by establishing what poetry is, its current (neglected) role in the U.S. curriculum, and the benefits -- both cognitive and personal -- to teaching it. Afterwards, I described guidelines on poetry specific to AP English Literature & Composition, set out by The College Board. The review then transitioned over to discussing instructional techniques in three main sections: reading comprehension, fiction interpretation, and poetry teaching. For the first two sections, I provided a definition, discussed major approaches, and highlighted several instructional techniques related to those specific skills; for the last, I described two approaches to poetry instruction as well as expounded on several research-based techniques teachers can use with their students.



**Preview of Subsequent Chapters**

Looking forward, chapter three will provide an overview of my capstone project. The overview will describe my current teaching context, guiding frameworks, and the format of the project. In chapter four, I will reflect on what I have learned from completing this capstone and project.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Project Description**

#### **Chapter Overview**

My capstone project focuses on identifying and describing instructional techniques that improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in AP English Literature & Composition. Thus, my research question is: “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature & Composition?”

This chapter is organized into seven main sections: 1) chapter overview; 2) a justification of the curricular framework; 3) a description of the project context, including the intended audience; 4) a description of the project development process; 5) a proposed timeline for the project; 6) a summary of this chapter; and 7) a preview of what is to come in the final chapter.

#### **Rationale for Curricular Framework**

My current school does not prescribe a curricular framework; therefore, I chose one based on my overarching philosophies and what best fits the practical needs of my capstone project.

Three strong beliefs influenced the choice for my curricular framework of choice, Understanding by Design (UbD). The first is that education exists for students, not for teachers; thus, the audience is a primary consideration. UbD aligns with this ideal and focuses on the “user experience,” transferable and enduring learning -- i.e. *understanding* -- versus teaching (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The second belief, which goes hand in hand with the first, is that outcomes should drive instruction. UbD also aligns with this

ideal; instead of hoping for an outcome, teachers purposefully *design* curriculum with the end in mind. The third and final is a phrase that has become one of my mottos: “The day you stop trying to get better is the day you should retire.” UbD agrees, taking a continuous improvement approach to the learning process and requiring regular curriculum reviews. Combining all three beliefs, a curricular framework that is guided by developing deep student understanding, uses backwards design, and is flexible enough to allow for revisions, best aligned with my philosophies.

UbD was also practical considering the scope and context of my project. Because I developed a single, isolated unit and adding in pedagogical techniques, it made sense to use a curricular framework specifically for unit design (versus, say, whole course design).

## **Project Context**

### **School Demographics and Description**

Located in Minnesota, my school is a private, Catholic institution that serves approximately 800 students between 6th and 12th grade. The student body is predominantly white (~90%) and Catholic (~80%), and largely comes from middle to upper-middle class households. Generally speaking, there is both a tradition of academic excellence at the school and a strong sense of community among students.

The daily schedule shifted this school year. In 2016-17 and years before, my school was on a traditional 44-minute, seven period timetable; for 2017-18 and moving forward, we are on a modified period/block schedule. The main features of this new schedule are that two days of the week, classes are on a block schedule (odd periods on the first day; even periods on the second day), and there is flexible time built in so that students can get help from teachers during the school day. Both of these features

impacted, and will continue to impact, the way I formulate curriculum. However, for the purposes of this project and its applicability to other teachers and schools, my UbD unit plan is based on a traditional 45-minute period that meets every day.

### **AP English Literature & Composition Students**

By default, all AP English Literature & Composition students are seniors. Gender-wise, the class tends to draw more females than males; in the 2016-17 school year, thirty-nine of the fifty-five students (~70%) were female. A few students in the 2016-17 school year had learning plans -- a quasi-IEP (Individualized Education Plan) -- but mostly for emotional concerns, like depression, versus documented learning disabilities (LDs). This year, 2017-18, twenty-seven of the forty (~68%) are female, and none have learning plans; one, however, is a native Mandarin speaker from China, which has added great value to our interpretations of literature as well as our cultural understandings.

In terms of prior learning experiences, almost all AP English Literature & Composition students have been in the honors program since their freshman year, and were admitted based on an entrance exam, teacher recommendation, English grades, and overall GPA. Prior to reaching AP English Literature & Composition their senior year, they took AP English Language & Composition, and -- generally speaking -- have a strong background in rhetorical analysis, timed essay writing, and more.

### **The Bigger Picture**

Many teachers new to AP English Literature & Composition will find themselves in my position. They will have a loose understanding of what is expected and what might appear on the AP test based on the course description and released exams, but the “how”

-- i.e. the curriculum -- is their professional decision; the freedom is both welcomed and overwhelming. This unit plan will provide an example of how English teachers can give their students a strong start with poetry, the piece that tends to be more difficult for students.

### **Project Development Process**

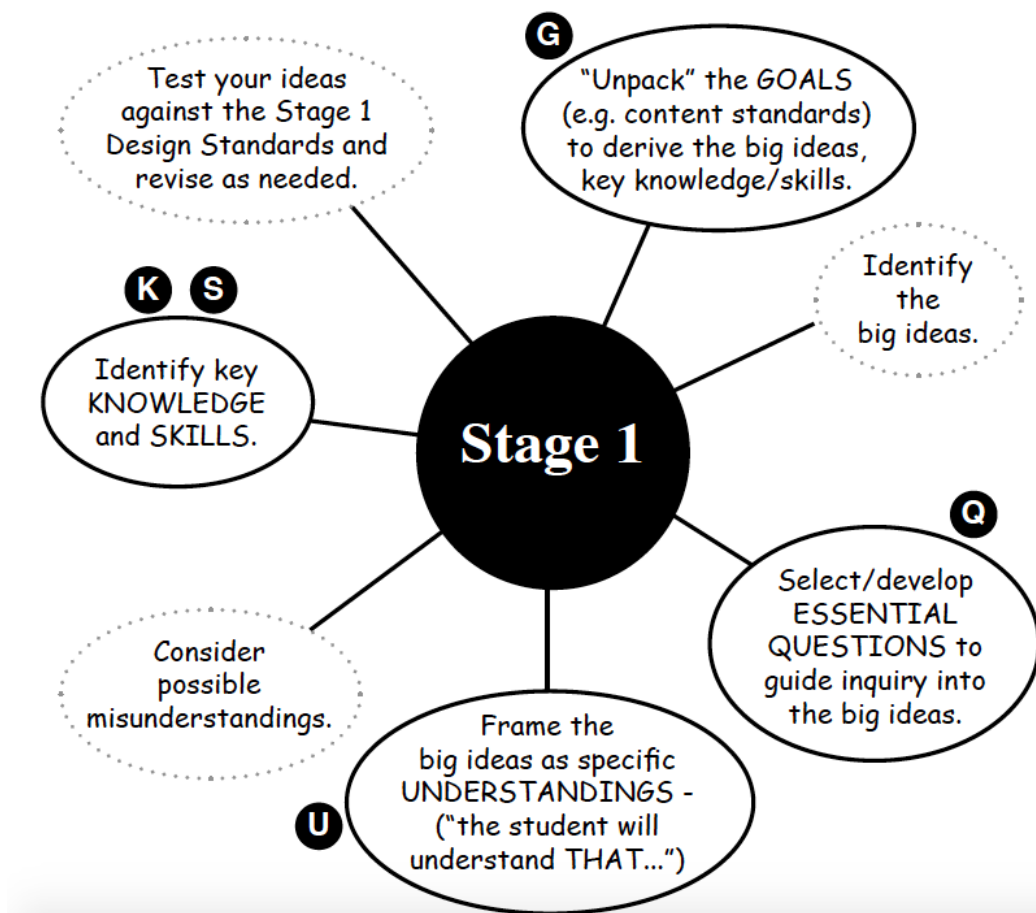
The goal of this project was to develop a two-week introductory unit that establishes basic content knowledge and skills in AP English & Composition. (Naturally, poetry study should not stop here; poetry should be integrated throughout the rest of the course in order to develop the knowledge and skill base necessary for poetry success.) This unit plan also advocates for specific, research-based instructional techniques described in chapter two. A copy of the UbD template is provided in the Appendix.

According to Wiggins & McTighe (2005), there are three main stages to developing a unit: 1) “identify desired results,” 2) “determine acceptable evidence,” and 3) “plan learning experiences and instruction” (p. 18). The first stage of UbD focuses on concretizing specific outcomes I am looking to produce, and is conceptualized in Figure 1 (Wiggins, 2005) on the next page. Wiggins (2005) notes that the items in each bubble do not need to be completed in any particular order; rather, curriculum designers should start wherever makes the most sense based on their context and project specifics. For my project, I have synthesized expectations from the AP English Literature & Composition course description as well as the CCSS ELA standards for grades 11-12.

After establishing the essential understandings, questions, knowledge, and skills, I moved on to Stage 2, which involves designing assessments. Because UbD espouses backwards design, it was important to first consider the summative assessment: how will

students demonstrate the desired understandings of the unit and by what criteria will they be measured? Following the summative assessment, I created formative assessments that can be used during the course of the unit to help both the students and teacher understand where they are at in achieving learning outcomes.

Figure 1: Stage 1 of UbD conceptualized (Wiggins, 2005).



Finally, Stage 3 involved designing learning activities to guide students towards the knowledge and skills necessary to develop the essential understandings. In general, Wiggins & McTighe (2005) advocate for establishing purpose for students, “hooking” them in, equipping them with the proper knowledge and skills, encouraging them to consider various perspectives, providing feedback on formative assessments, tailoring learning for individual needs, and sequencing work in a logical way. They also take a

constructivist approach, and argue that students need to be provided multiple opportunities to practice at various levels of teacher scaffolding, as well as arrive at the essential understandings themselves (versus being told). In this stage, I considered and reconsidered materials I used in the past to develop stronger comprehension and interpretation of poetry.

From there, I moved on to drafting the unit assessment, individual lessons, and any related resources. Crafting the unit as a whole involved difficult decisions, as I had to be quite selective with my content coverage and skills focus. I also took care to integrate into the unit the instructional techniques that chapter two of this capstone identifies as best practices.

### **Project Timeline**

This project was developed primarily during the spring semester of 2018 and will be implemented for use the fall semester of 2018. Table 1 below shows the project timeline.

Table 1: Project Timeline

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action Item(s)</b>
July 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Completed chapters 1-3 drafts.</li> <li>Garnered feedback from advisor and reviewers.</li> </ul>
September - November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implemented the existing curriculum.</li> </ul>
December 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluated the existing curriculum by: 1) analyzing formative assessments, and 2) garnering feedback from students.</li> <li>Began brainstorming ideas for Stage 1 of the UbD unit plan.</li> </ul>
February 5, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drafted Stages 1-3 of the UbD unit plan.</li> </ul>
February 18, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drafted the unit final assessment and lessons 1-3.</li> </ul>

March 4, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Drafted lessons 4-6 (and any accompanying resources from lessons 1-6).</li> </ul>
March 18, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Drafted lessons 7-10.</li> </ul>
March 19, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Submitted capstone project for feedback from peer and content reviewers.</li> </ul>
March 26, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Revised and edited capstone project based on feedback from peer and content reviewers.</li> <li>● Submitted capstone chapters for feedback from peer and content reviewers.</li> </ul>
April 1, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Submitted a solid draft of the capstone project to the primary adviser.</li> </ul>
April 2, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Revised and edited capstone chapters based on feedback from peer and content reviewers.</li> </ul>
April 8, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Submitted a solid draft of the capstone chapters to the primary adviser.</li> </ul>
April 20, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Revised capstone project and chapters based on feedback from the primary adviser.</li> </ul>
May 6, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Submitted final capstone project and chapters.</li> </ul>

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I justified using UbD as a curricular framework, as it aligns with my philosophies and practical goals. I also provided a description of my project's context, which positioned the project not only within my current school and student body, but also within the bigger picture of AP English Literature & Composition. I then described the process of developing the curriculum using the UbD framework and the timeline I used for completing the project.

### **Preview of the Subsequent Chapter**

Chapter four will reflect on this capstone and project as a whole. Within this reflection, I will describe what I learned and connect these learnings to research presented



in the literature review. I will also discuss implications, limitations, and possible future projects and research related to my topic.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Conclusion**

#### **Chapter Overview**

This capstone has sought to answer the question, “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature & Composition?” Chapter four will provide reflections on 1) how this capstone -- literature review and project -- contributed to my teaching, 2) implications and limitations of my project, and 3) plans to communicate my results. The chapter will end with a summary and conclusion.

#### **Impact of the Literature Review and Project**

This capstone (literature review and project) has advanced my teaching in three main ways, which are detailed below.

#### **Provided Context**

The literature review helped place my research and project in the national context. Before reading through a wide swath of journal articles and other material, I did not necessarily have a strong understanding of how my individual experience fit within broader discussions in the field. For example, before reading, I assumed the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) -- especially with their emphasis on informational texts -- would not address poetry in any significant way; I thought that it might be mentioned a few times. However, poetry is included (in some way) at every grade level and every single strand except one (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Furthermore, I appreciated learning about how poetry develops critical thinking and literacy skills, which are relevant and critical

components of many past and current movements within our field (Bailey, 1989; Wilfong, 2008). In essence, seeing that poetry saturates the CCSS and is related to vital skill sets within English education sparked even more interest in my research question and project.

### **Verified Current Beliefs and Practices**

In addition to providing context, the literature review verified my understanding of two important *why* questions: why is poetry not being taught, and why should we teach it? Prior to investigating my research question, I already had a few inklings as to why poetry went untouched in many schools' curriculums, namely that it can be more abstract and difficult to teach. I also sensed that, despite its underrepresentation, poetry somehow seemed worthy of our time and attention, and that students were missing out on an entire literary genre that holds immeasurable cultural significance. Finally, from my own experience as a senior in high school, I knew that poetry could be taught to math and science minds and that there is value in the brain being stretched in different ways to ultimately be well-rounded.

Beyond corroborating my views on poetry's current role in English education, the literature review also confirmed that some of the techniques I have been using are considered research-based best practices. In my six years as an educator, I have been a proponent of the comprehensive literacy techniques detailed in chapter two: reciprocal teaching (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Fisher & Frey, 2015), text structures (Alvermann, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Ohlson, Monroe-Ossi, & Parris, 2015), graphic organizers (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004; Pang, 2013), and -- perhaps above all -- close reading (Fisher & Frey, 2015;

Gambrell, Malloy, Marinak, Mazzoni, 2015). Whole group discussion (Agee, 2000; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Gritter, 2011; Ohlson, Monroe-Ossi, & Parris, 2015) and allowing student choice (Abrahamson, 2002; Jago, 2002; Lockward, 1994; Steineke, 2002) are also mainstays within my repertoire. In short, the literature review felt validating.

### **Encouraged Intentional Teaching and New Strategies**

While there were strategies I was already using deliberately, the literature review encouraged me to become even more intentional in integrating them into my Understanding by Design (UbD) unit plan. As I was writing the individual lessons, I found myself referring back to the techniques I detailed in chapter two to ensure that I was representing my research within the curriculum. Though not all techniques are employed within the unit, e.g. critical lenses (which are addressed at a later point in the course), many are present and were selected for their utility in the genre of poetry. Furthermore, the literature review encouraged me to try new strategies that I have been hesitant to use in the past. For example, I have been reluctant to have my students write their own poetry, but my research on imitation writing (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Gorlewski & Fogle, 2012; Haugh et al., 2002; Jones, 2004) coaxed me to include composition of poetry within the unit.

Another piece of my research that caused me to question my previous practice was that of starting with engagement (Eva-Wood, 2004; Haaland, 2017; Jago, 2002; Lockward, 1994; Steineke, 2002). Because Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature & Composition is a college-level course, I tended to start and maintain chiefly focused on technical information and terms in the sphere of poetry. While I certainly still honor the

language of poetry and skill sets in the unit, I feel I have softened my previous approach, which might have been more rigid and scientific, so to speak. This “softening” should not mean the unit is less rigorous; rather, it should engage students at a deeper, more personal level with the content. In turn, stronger engagement could produce better comprehension and analysis.

Finally, this capstone renewed my efforts to investigate best practices when making curricular and instructional choices. Right out of my undergraduate degree, I explored academic sources for ideas more consistently than I have been the past few years. (Sometimes in teaching it is easy to get into the habit of doing what “feels right” versus what is deemed effective per research.) I am grateful that the literature review and project have reignited that flame, as the motivation to stay current will be mine and mine alone after completing this degree.

### **Implications and Limitations**

#### **Implications**

One implication is that this project might prompt some useful revisions in the English curriculum at my school. By integrating poetry earlier in our scope and sequence, my team and I can help students develop a stronger foundation for comprehension and interpretation before they arrive to my class their senior year. In turn, I will not have to lay as much groundwork in the fall, which frees up a substantial amount of time for exploring other pieces of literature, developing different skills, etc. Part of this curriculum review process will undoubtedly involve justifying my suggested revisions, helping coworkers become more confident teaching poetry, and reflecting on results of student assessments to see what we were able to achieve.

Another implication is that this project will better equip teachers who are new to AP English Literature & Composition to tackle the “how” of poetry. As I mentioned in chapter one, The College Board does not prescribe instructional techniques, terminology, or even specific authors; teachers, then, are expected to synthesize expectations and content from a variety of sources (e.g. course description, past AP exams, trainings) and hope that they are giving students what they need to be successful on the test and in general. This problem of ambiguity is one that I, too, found overwhelming. Thus, my project could give new AP teachers a concrete idea of how they could start their poetry journey, with the understanding that it should be integrated and practiced throughout the course and that the unit plan should be customized to the teachers’ and students’ unique context.

The potential for future, related projects is unending. As our culture continues to shift and sway (generationally, linguistically, technologically, etc.), teachers of any subject will need to adjust the content and skills they emphasize in addition to the instructional techniques they use. Likewise, the AP exam itself has been altered in structure and content numerous times over the years, which will necessitate revisions to curriculum and technique.

Naturally, the root concept of this project is not limited to AP English Literature & Composition; there are other courses -- AP or not -- that face the same or similar challenges. Perhaps students arrive somewhat unprepared in a certain area of content and need a “crash course” at the beginning of the year; perhaps the concept or skill is something that students struggle with, year after year; or perhaps a teacher, like me,

wants to ameliorate a weakness in his or her own content knowledge and skill set by having a solid plan to work from.

### **Limitations**

The most obvious limitation to this project is that it presents an introductory, “crash course” unit. Because of its fixed scope, the unit plan does not address the heavy lifting that will need to happen throughout the course in order to develop true comprehension and interpretation competency in poetry. In other words, it will take far more time and practice for students to grasp and analyze poetry at a deep level. Beyond that, there could be contextual factors at a different school that would render pieces of the unit plan less applicable or less effective (e.g. different daily schedules or class lengths, students who do not have as much background knowledge in literary analysis, inability to make paper copies of poems for each student, etc.).

Another major limitation is that this unit has not been implemented yet. As with any curriculum, especially those being taught for the first time, the teacher will need to make adjustments during the unit itself. For instance, the teacher might need to address misconceptions that might not be detailed on the unit plan or spend time reteaching a concept or skill that students (perhaps unexpectedly) struggled with. In the same way, at its completion, the teacher will also need to reflect on the successes and shortcomings of the unit and refine it for next time.

### **Communicating My Results**

Because this unit plan was developed in relative isolation, it will be vital to communicate my findings to my English colleagues. I plan on sharing the presentation created in this capstone course with my Department Chair first, and then with the rest of

my department. I expect that this presentation will generate discussion about the potential value in teaching more poetry within our courses, but also literacy instructional techniques in general.

Beyond the four walls of my school, my project could be useful for other educators. First, the project will reside in Hamline's Digital Commons where it can be fodder for other capstones or AP English teachers looking for solutions. Additionally, my project could be shared at one of College Board's Summer Institutes for teachers who are new to AP English Literature & Composition, or in other forums for teacher professional development.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this final chapter, I reflected on how the literature review and project helped me grow as a teacher. Namely, this capstone helped provide context for my instructional problem, verified several current beliefs and practices, as well as encouraged intentional integration of new strategies. I then described the implications and limitations of the project, along with plans to communicate my results.

### **Conclusion**

This capstone has roots tracing back to my senior year in high school. At the beginning of that year, I had no clue what poetry really was; it seemed like an abstract, ambiguous jumble of words that were usually too histrionic to be taken seriously. It turns out I was wrong. Though it was a struggle for my mind to grasp poetry, I came to find great pleasure in studying it for the art form it is.

If I flash forward one decade to this moment and with this capstone, I have discerned that my main goal is to give my students a similar experience. By asking and



answering the question, “What instructional techniques improve comprehension and interpretation of poetry for students in Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature & Composition?” I have sought to distill incalculable possibilities into a clear, conclusive plan that will set up my students for success.

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## APPENDIX A: CCSS ELA Standards, Reading: Literature, 11-12

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### Standards in this strand:

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CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5](#)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.8

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10

### Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

### Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6

Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

**Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7

Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.8

(RL.11-12.8 not applicable to literature)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

**Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10

By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

## APPENDIX B: UbD Unit Plan Template

**Stage 1 - Desired Results**

<p><b>Established Goal(s):</b></p>
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<p><b>Understanding(s):</b></p>	<p><b>Essential Question(s):</b></p>
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*Students will understand that . . .*

<p><b>Knowledge</b></p>	<p><b>Skill</b></p>
-------------------------	---------------------

*Students will know . . .*

*Students will be able to . . .*

**Stage 2 - Assessment Evidence**

<p><b>Performance Task(s):</b></p>	<p><b>Other Evidence:</b></p>
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**Stage 3 - Learning Plan**

<p><b>Learning Activities:</b></p>
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